Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2011
Senses of the South / Référendums populaires

"Key to the highway": blues records and the great migration

Louis Mazzari

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5325
ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher
AFEA

Electronic reference
Louis Mazzari, « "Key to the highway": blues records and the great migration », *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2011, Online since 04 January 2012, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5325

“Key to the highway”: blues records and the great migration

Louis Mazzari

1 A dozen years ago, I was driving through the Delta backcountry below New Orleans, where the Mississippi roils into the Gulf of Mexico, and I picked up a hitch-hiker, a young black man in his mid-twenties standing alone on a long, flat stretch of highway, surrounded by acres of farmland and wild brush and the humid tang of salt air. He told me he was leaving home, for the first time, after three years of oil rigs and unemployment. He asked whether I would mind stopping at his house, so he could pick up some clothes. We turned off the highway onto a mile-long dirt road and into a few dozen cinder-block ranch houses on half a dozen dusty streets. We stopped in front of the house where he and a friend had lived as squatters for a couple of years. I waited in the car while he stuffed all his clothes into a pillow case. He gave a little wave to the few folks on their porches as we rode slowly back up to the highway, but he didn’t want to stop, even at his mother’s home.

2 A few miles down the road, I pulled over by a confluence of Interstates. “Where are you going?” I wondered. “Maybe Detroit,” he ventured, “or maybe Florida.” He thanked me, slid the door shut, and slipped into blinding sunshine.

3 I think of him now when I hear Robert Johnson’s line, “I’m going to California, to my sweet home Chicago” (Johnson). Johnson’s conflation of the two destinations gives his declaration the character of fantasy. It makes something mythological of the idea of travel in the black experience of the Great Migration through the 1920s and 1930s, and in the blues records that accompanied the migrants and suffused their travels with the presence of fatefulness and the urgency of desire, with the loss and humor of the immigrant, with the poignancy of confusion and the sweetness of arrival. The differences and distance between California and Chicago had little meaning in Johnson’s psychic landscape; the distinction between them was overpowered by the overwhelming impulse to leave. That impulse—its causes and the migrants’ response to it—was so powerful that, along the Mississippi today, its echo still sounds.

4 This essay considers the way those blues records of the 1920s and 1930s reinforced the decisions of poor farmers, sharecroppers, and workingmen and -women to move north. Blues musicians, focusing on a new sense of individual agency, played the soundtrack for the move.

5 The blues addressed the racial oppression and poverty of the black South in a folk idiom through the conduit of popular culture. Without voicing direct protest, this country folk art used the medium of the newest technology to herald a message of modernity from deep within the freedom of its sound.

6 Because of its importance and resonance in our music and poetry, the blues offers a colorful and profound perspective on American culture and society in the twentieth century—and it collaborates on ideas about what constitutes the modern. The tremendous success of blues records from between the world wars sprung from their interplay between folk and mass-market cultures during the 1920s and 1930s as the electronic media began its extraordinary influence on American society and culture. Such influence became a soundtrack for black migrants. Beyond that, as historian Susan Douglas writes, "jazz and the blues didn't simply 'reflect' the African American experience; rather the music itself became the basis on which black culture was built and evolved" (Douglas, 97). These foundational forms of music were flowering just at the moment when mechanical reproduction and broadcasting were becoming widespread. We broaden our view of the twentieth century in America by looking at the ways these black songsters, born at the bottom of a racially ordered society, transformed their sense of rootlessness and alienation into modernist tableaux of movement and persistence.[1]

7 Early blues records are steeped in the aura of authenticity that adheres to the status of the outsider, a fashionable stance for each generation since the 1920s, in both black and white American culture. Today, we cannot draw any meaningful comparisons in any form of contemporary music with the radically alternative character of race-record blues. The authenticity of race-record blues was created by musicians and singers whose "outsider" world-view developed day-to-day under race-based boundaries written into daily custom and carried emphatically into law, songsters whose "outsider" status was built on notions about the differences between races as determined by nature and God.

8 Black southerners first began trickling north in the 1890s, while white supremacy was being re-institutionalized throughout the region. They were also becoming newly diffident toward their status and their homeland, and both races could sense it. Transience was one sign of a new attitude. In 1910, more than half of all black farmers had moved within the previous four years, and only a third had been in their homes for as long as a year (Grossman, 30). But in spite of the motivation to go, black restlessness had few alternatives to endless rounds of sharecropping different local farms.

9 Since Reconstruction, the ideal of the small farmstead had attracted blacks as much as whites. But where black emphasis on movement, during Reconstruction and the late nineteenth century, had attached to a search for that small homestead, mobility became escape during the 1910s through increasing opportunity in cities south and north. Once black men were welcome to work in northern factories during the war, they had found a direction. And women found they could earn as much as a domestic in the North as they had earned back home in a week. Northern cities captured the imagination of increasingly restless blacks. "The packing houses in Chicago for a while seemed to be

everything," said a laborer from Hattiesburg, Mississippi. "You could not rest in your bed at night for *Chicago*."[2]

10 "The Negroes just quietly move away without taking their recognized leaders into their confidence any more than they do the white people about them," remarked one observer. W.E.B. DuBois noted the migrants' lack of organization (DuBois, 63-66). The Great Migration had no explicit leaders, to be sure, but especially as it continued into the 1930s, leaders-by-example were appearing on race-record blues, proclaiming in music another way of life. Both the sound and style of the songs and the newness of their medium conveyed to migrants a sense that, in spite of everything they had previously been taught, life could change. As these black southerners were quietly picking up and leaving for New York and Detroit, the music they brought with them by the tens of thousands was blues.

11 Through the 1910s, blues songs had been sold in sheet music, but *Chicago Defender* editors wondered why African Americans were able to buy Caruso but not records by black singers. Until Okeh took a chance in 1920, the record industry did not believe a market existed among blacks. The first blues record, Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues," caught Okeh completely by surprise. Hoping their experiment would sell a few thousand copies, the company sold seventy-five thousand in a month. Radio broadcasting began in 1920, too, cutting into the sales of phonograph records across the industry. But few radio stations broadcast black music during the Jazz Age, so race records continued to sell, and companies recorded hundreds of black vaudeville and blues singers throughout the decade and sold commercial recordings of blues, gospel music, and sermons to African Americans across the South. The impact was immediate and profound.

12 After emancipation, movement in itself had felt a kind of magic, and the itinerant musician a figure of importance for the generations that followed. Howard Odum pioneered social research among rural blacks in the early 1900s and observed that

> Perhaps no person is sung more among the negroes than the homeless and friendless wanderer, with his disappointments in love and adventure [...] The wandering 'songster' takes great pride in thus singing with skill some of his favorite songs; then he can boast of his achievements as 'a bad man' with his 'box.' As he wanders from negro community to community, he finds lodging and solace. So the negroes at home take up the songs, and sing them to their companions, this constituting perhaps the most effective method of courtship. (Odum, 255-94).

13 Since the 1890s, blues had been carried by itinerant songsters throughout of the South, in barrooms and former slave quarters, in jubilees and on riverboats. It had developed from the worksongs of fieldhands and railroad laborers, who used rhythm to help regulate and sustain the pace of their work, and the blues existed alongside folk songs about mine disasters and steamboat gamblers. But blues songs were less interested in crafting a narrative. What Robert Palmer writes about early bluesman Charley Patton could be extended to the genre as a whole: "Patton found public events truly meaningful only insofar as they impinged on his private world—his perceptions, his feelings" (Palmer, 67).

14 Spirituals had expressed the community's purpose and direction. "The blues, on the other hand," writes Angela Davis, "articulated a new valuation of individual emotional needs and desires" (Davis, 4). Always first-person, the blues was not so concerned with a sense of community, or spirituality, or with the functionality of work. The blues was all about personal, individual expression. Richard Wright saw the difference between the radically

individualized blues and the communal spirituals, the other main descendent of slave music, in terms of class.

> I'd surmise that the spirituals, so dearly beloved of the Southern American Whites, came from those slaves who were closest to the Big Houses of the plantations where they caught vestiges of Christianity whiffed to them from the Southern Whites' cruder forms of Baptist or Methodist religions. If the plantations' house slaves were somewhat remote from Christianity, the field slaves were almost completely beyond the pale [...] And it was from them and their descendants that the devil songs called the blues came—that confounding triptych of the convict, the migrant, the rambler, the steel driver, the ditch digger, the roustabout, the pimp, the prostitute, the urban or rural illiterate outsider (Wright, 10).

15 The white image of the blues songster's restless lifestyle pegged him as lazy and shiftless, irresponsible. But in the black community, a man or woman who survived without working for whites was a character of fascination. Black southerners knew the dangers of moving beyond accepted boundaries the way the bluesman did. To be what in white eyes was a "shiftless" hobo riding the rails meant risking attack dogs in dark trainyards and outwitting the yardbosses. To be "lazy" about fieldwork meant rejecting the rigged game of sharecropping and looking for better odds elsewhere. Wright pointed out that a migrant's decision to move could in itself be taken as a challenge to white authority (Grossman, 38).

16 Wright's "devil songs" sang from a moving center. Muddy Waters remembered "Walkin' Blues" as "the anthem" of the black Delta in the 1930s. "Woke up this mornin', lookin' 'round for my shoes / You know I had them mean old walkin' blues" (Palmer, 147). The ethos of movement sprang from a shifting identity at the heart of many blues personas. It was Robert Johnson's inheritance, to cite a significant example. Johnson was born in 1911, in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, south of Jackson. Charles Dodd, his mother's husband, fled to Memphis to avoid a lynch mob. In his absence, a man named Noah Johnson fathered Robert. Robert and his mother, Julia, moved to Memphis a few years later to live with Charles Dodd and his new mistress. By this time, Dodd had changed his name to Spencer. Robert later followed his mother and a new stepfather to Robinsonville, Mississippi. By the time Robert Johnson was killed in 1938, he had used the names Dodd and Spencer at different times and, of course, he also went by the name of his natural father. This background filled Johnson's records with an intensity of transience. Such blues as Johnson's gave voice to its listeners' dislocation, attuned to a country folk in peonage undergoing a radical shift in identity, hurtling into modernity on the Twentieth Century Limited.

17 The restless movement and psychic wandering that filled Johnson's life and music has since attracted a language of description that sounds like mythology in its sweep—and its impatience with facts and sequence. A liner note on a Big Joe Williams record plainly and succinctly encapsulated his early life: "He learned guitar as a boy and set out on a life of wandering which he has continued to this day" (*The Mississippi Blues*).

18 For many country blues singers, their wandering lives played the backbeat of their music. Henry Thomas and Amos Easton—called Bumble Bee Slim—are two representative examples, from two generations. Henry Thomas and Bumble Bee Slim form archetypes of transience, whose itinerancy filled their songs. Thomas was of the first generation born into freedom, in 1874, in East Texas near Oklahoma and Louisiana. All through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he wandered the South and Midwest as a hobo songster, and Thomas's recordings from the 1920s are suffused with his life on the road.

His masterpiece, "Railroadin' Some," isn't a blues, but a folk song and a modernist composition that uses the blues tone. Thomas creates a soundscape of guitar and reed pipe, simulating a train's rumble and whistle, achieving a train's speed and power. The lyric is a narrative created through its sung sequence of cities and towns along the railroad from East Texas to Chicago.

> Leaving Fort Worth, Texas, and go to Texarkana,
> And double back to Fort Worth.
> Come on down to Dallas [...]
> I'm on my way, but I don't know where.
> [...]
> Hello, Springfield! I'm on my way, Chicago!
> Bloomington!
> Joliet!
> Giving a highball pass on through!
> Highball pass on through, sir!
> Grand Carson!
> 31st Street Depot!
> Oak Street Depot!
> Chicago! (Thomas)

19 Who is the singer? Conductor, engineer, or passengers? Is it the voice of the train itself? Thomas sings a whole chorus in the culmination of cities, merging in the expression and excitement of the new, ending in the joyous shout, "*Chicago!*"

20 Amos Easton was born at the other end of the South, in Brunswick, Georgia, a generation later, in 1905. Born to an unstable family and restless from early childhood, he ran away from home at fifteen to join Barnum & Bailey's circus. After two years on the road, he returned to Brunswick, married briefly, then left again, riding the rails north. In 1928, he met bluesmen Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell in Indianapolis, and began playing rent parties and pool halls. By 1931, he was recording, and by 1937, he had recorded more than 150 tunes, including the popular, light novelty number "Greasy Greens" (Cahoon). While "Railroadin' Some" was a recording of a folk song, "Greasy Greens" was a pop record released, in the mid-1930s, to an audience of both southerners and northward migrants, who felt connected to their homeland through the cheerful associations—both downhome and knowing—and like so much pop culture since, at once sentimental and tongue-in-cheek.

> Way down South where I was born,
> They raise them good old greens and corn,
> Sweet potatoes and black eyed peas,
> Green tomatoes and pecan trees.
> Them greens is the best they grow,
> Them greens taste like home.
> Soft and easy, good and greasy,
> I'm crazy about my greasy greens. (Bumble Bee Slim)

21 Migrants trusted the realism, as well responded to the adventure, that they heard in the blues. Some migrants turned to religion. Blues songsters advocated an alternative—movement, speed, and distance were solutions to particular problems. In "When the Levee Breaks," the freedom of the blues becomes a refrain of escape, movement as a calculus of survival. Here, the blues speaks with the directness of realism.

> Crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good.
> Crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good.
> When the levee breaks, mama, you got to move. (McCoy and McCoy)

22 Many songsters expressed movement not as a choice, but as a response to any crisis, whether flood or plague or trouble of any sort. "Going Down to the Station" captures the music's uncanny mix of exuberance and dread, in the figures of the eagle and the blues—the haunting sense of freedom while fleeing.

> I'm going down to the station, take that eagle when she runs.
> I'm going down to the station, take that eagle when she runs.
> Well, I don't want to travel, people, but these blues won't leave me alone.

23 In "Poor Boy, Long Ways From Home," Gus Cannon recorded a traditional tune—one of the oldest in the genre—that offered a quintessentially American solution—escape to the wilderness, another way of suggesting with Huck Finn to "Light out for the territory."

> Been a poor boy and a long way from home,
> Long way from home.
> Been a poor boy and a long way from home.
> I got arrested, no money to buy my fine,
> Money to buy my fine.
> I got arrested, no money to buy my fine.
> I guess I'll have to catch a Frisco out in this land,
> Catch a Frisco out.
> Lord, I guess I'll have to catch a Frisco out.
> And if that don't do, I'm going to try the woods a while,
> Try the woods a while. (Cannon)

24 Many blues lyrics don't mention travel or leaving, but their rhythms insist on action. "Baby, Please Don't Go," in spite of its lyric's injunction, is built on a backbeat so propulsive and urgent the effect is of falling forward.

25 Women made the first blues records, and their songs were often informed by vaudeville acts, carnivals, medicine shows, and minstrelsy. Ma Rainey had been touring for twenty-five years before she made her first record in 1923. If bluesmen were often drawn to an image of the shiftless rounder, women blues singers often projected themselves as independent of conventional social and sexual restraints, with a sense of license and taking charge of their own lives. Angela Davis observes, "Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation [...]The focus on sexual love in blues music was thus quite different from the prevailing idealization of romantic love in mainstream popular music" (Davis, 5, 10).

26 Lucille Bogan certainly agreed. "I got something between my legs," she crowed, "will make a dead man come" (Bogan, "Shave 'Em Dry Blues"). Bogan was one among many women whose songs shouted their desire and anger. Such figures of independence encouraged agency, movement, and the excitement of change. As Paul Garon writes in *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, the eroticism of the blues was a vehicle of black liberation.

> In those moments of most intense passion, be they imaginary or actual, the obsessive nature of eroticism makes itself known. This particular obsession carries with it a promise of freedom that is undeniable: love destroys repression. Eroticism becomes a paradox; a nonlimiting obsession. (Garon, 57)

27 Ma Rainey and Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey, Sippie Wallace, and Bogan, among others, did not subscribe to the virtues of Victorian convention. "If you mistreat me," sung Bessie Smith, "I'll hunt you like a hound" (Smith, "Honey Man Blues"). Smith recorded 252 songs, and in only four is traditional marriage mentioned without sarcasm. In "Ticket Agent, Ease Your Window Down," her man has left her, but in her knowing, urbane way, Smith embodies independence.

If he don't want me, he had no right to stall
I can get more men than a passenger train can haul [...]
I hate a man that don't play fair and square
'Cause you can get a crooked daddy 'most anywhere. (Smith, "Ticket Agent, Ease Your Window Down")

28 The blues is superbly suited to express the complications of love and sex, and some of the most powerful poetry in blues records addresses the differing consequences of desire for men and women and the difficulty of their sexual politics. In Bogan's blues, "Alley Boogie," the poignancy is more powerful for its realistic, matter-of-fact voice and for its recognition of the ambiguous and refractory quality of desire.

Papa got a watch,
brother got a ring,
sister got an armful
from that alley boogie that thing.
She's wild about her boogie,
only thing she choose.
Now she's got to do the boogie
to buy alley baby some shoes. (Bogan, "Alley Boogie")

29 The blues was not explicit protest music. One study counts fewer than two percent of all the blues and gospel songs recorded up to 1945 as carrying any political comment at all (Van Rihn, xv). In a context in which no white southerner of any prominence advocated racial equality, the race-record industry shunned statements. As Garon writes, the blues protest was metaphorical and expressionistic: "not so much the social or economic conditions of black life in America, but the effects of these conditions on the mind are expressed in the blues." Like the spirituals, blues songs projected their dissatisfaction metaphorically. Blues was a genre not descriptive but psychological, not documentary but expressive (Garon, 65). Garon quotes Memphis Slim telling Alan Lomax, in the 1940s, that the "'blues is a kind of revenge. You know you wanta say something...you wanta signifyin' like—that's the blues. . . . [W]e-all fellers, we had a hard time in life an' like that, and things we couldn't say or do, so we sign it, I mean we sing'" (Garon, 201). In the late 1960s, friends of William Ferris among the bluesmen in the Mississippi Delta explained the indirect nature of their lyrics. Jasper Love, for instance, talked about the way his grandmother's hymns, sung during slavery, had contained coded messages about the Underground Railroad. His peers among the Delta bluesmen did the same thing. When Little Willie Foster would sing, "My baby mistreats me," he was really saying, "My boss mistreats me" (Ferris).

30 Being lyric poetry, the blues does not so much describe its singers' condition as stake out a complex emotional terrain. It's often more introspective than accusatory. It often searches as much for guilt as for blame, accepts penance as it urges retribution. The blues singer often reflects on his own complicity in his troubles. In John Dudley's "Clarksdale Mill Blues," for example, complaint is inseparable from soul searching and the pain of self-knowledge.

Tell me where was you boy
when that Clarksdale Mill burned down?
You know where I was.
Tell me where was you now
when that Clarksdale Mill burned down?
I was standing right there
with my face all full of frown.
Oh, Lord have mercy—who you telling?—

on my wicked, on my wicked soul.
Baby, you know I don't mistreat you.
Oh, Lord have mercy on my wicked soul.
Wouldn't mistreat my baby now
for my weight in gold. (Dudley, "Clarksdale Mill Blues")

31 Far from making explicit complaint against racial oppression, blues records virtually ignored white individuals and society. In so doing, blues, barrelhouse music, boogie woogie, and jazz records posited identification with a black culture in the same way that Zora Neale Hurston did in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Both Hurston's Eatonville and the blues speak from a particularly African-American culture. "Without the blues," claims Jeff Titon, "the black experience down home would have been significantly closer to white middle-class behavior, making it infinitely more difficult for black people today to find a separate identity in an Afro-American culture distinct from Anglo-American culture" (Titon, 59).

32 Garon sees black working-class blues singers as ridiculing "the repressive norms of the white bourgeoisie, negating bourgeois ideology by the mere act of non-acceptance. Although this form of rejection/negation does not necessarily comprise an effort to change society's structure, it was, historically, the principal vehicle of poetic revolt for blacks throughout roughly the first third of this century. Other forms of revolt, although existent, did not relate to the black working class on the same level that blues did" (Garon, 54).

33 These sentiments of dissent and retribution exist under the surface of blues music, though, just as spirituals had carried messages of emancipation under the metaphysics of their lyrics. Mississippi Bracy was talking to a woman, only ostensibly in "I'll Overcome Some Day."

Worked all the summer and all the fall
Now I've got to take Christmas in my overalls,
Going up the country, won't be back till fall
Times get no better, I won't be back at all.
But by and by, I'll overcome, some sweet day.
You treat me like you didn't know my name,
You mistreat me now for another man.
But by and by, I'll overcome, some sweet day. (Bracy)

34 For sure, as he sang about being mistreated, Bracy also has the sharecropping system, and Jim Crow on his mind, too. In "Steady Rollin' Man," Robert Johnson sang, "I'm a hardworking man, have been for many long years I know / And some creampuff using my money, whoa, baby, that'll never be no more" (Johnson, "Steady Rollin' Man"). There is no hint of racial animosity in any of the lyrics, but it is easy to imagine a white face behind Johnson's image of a "creampuff."

35 The blues records of the 1920s and 1930s did not always explicitly exhort the sharecropper and laundress to pick up and move North, but blues songs exuded the attraction of freedom and movement that fueled migrants' determination to take a strange and uncertain path. Blues records did not so much speak to the ways and means of migrating as fed the urge to movement and liberation (Dudley, "Po' Boy Blues").

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOGAN, Lucille, "Alley Boogie," Chicago, Brunswick 7210, 1930.

---, "Shave 'Em Dry Blues," Columbia/Legacy 65705, 1935.

BRACY, Mississippi, "I'll Overcome Some Day," *The Mississippi Blues, No. 3, Transition: 1926-1937*, Origin Jazz Library OJL-17.

BUMBLE BEE SLIM, "Greasy Greens," *Complete Recorded Works, vol. 1, c. October 1931 to March 1934,* Document Records, DOCD 5261.

CAHOON, Brad, "'Bumble Bee Slim' Easton (1905-1968)," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1656 (accessed July 1, 2011).

CANNON, Gus, "Poor Boy Long Ways From Home," Paramount 12571, 1927.

DAVIS, Angela Y., *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1999.

DOUGLAS, Susan J., *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

DUBOIS, W.E.B., "The Migration of Negroes," *Crisis* 14, 2, June 1917, 63-66.

DUDLEY, John, "Clarksdale Mill Blues," *Southern Journey, vol. 3: 61 Highway Mississippi*, Rounder CD 1703, 1959.

---, "Po' Boy Blues," *Southern Journey, vol. 3: 61 Highway Mississippi*, Rounder CD 1703, 1959.

FERRIS, William, *Give My Poor Heart Ease : Voices of the Mississippi Blues,* Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

GROSSMAN, James, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

JOHNSON, Robert, "Steady Rollin' Man," *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*, Sony B000002757.

McCOY, Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie McCOY, "When the Levee Breaks," Columbia, 1929.

The Mississippi Blues, No. 3, Transition: 1926-1937, Origin Jazz Library OJL-17.

ODUM, Howard W., "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 24, 93, July-Sept., 1911, 255-94.

PALMER, Robert, *Deep Blues*, New York, Penguin Books, 1981.

SMITH, Bessie, "Honey Man Blues," Columbia 14172-D, 1926.

SMITH, Bessie, "Ticket Agent, Ease Your Window Down," Columbia 14025-D, 1924.

THOMAS, Henry, "Railroadin' Some" (C-4623), Vocalion 1443, 1929.

TITON, Jeff Todd, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1977.

VAN RIHN, Guido, *Roosevelt's Blues*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1997.

WRIGHT, Richard, "Foreword," in Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*, Toronto, Macmillan Co., 1960.

NOTES

1. William Ferris makes a grand claim for the music. "Blues are the key to the cultural and intellectual history of the black, the southern, and the American experience," he writes. "They affirm our spirit through love, protest, spirituality, humor, pathos, and celebration. They are a way of life, forged in the shadow of racism and violence, that teaches us how to endure and survive in the face of adversity." William Ferris, *Give My Poor Heart Ease : Voices of the Mississippi Blues* Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2009, 258.

2. Grossman, 4.

ABSTRACTS

This paper looks at the way "race record" blues of the 1920s and 1930s reinforced the decision of poor farmers, sharecroppers, and working men and women to move to the cities of the North. The theme is the way black southerners used the blues as the soundtrack of the Great Migration. In a sense, the Delta blues was a musical travel narrative for tens of thousands of people who were leaving the rural South for an unknown, modern and industrial future. The paper will explore blues music as an expression of the fluidity of African American society and culture during the Great Depression.

While avoiding direct protest, blues singers and musicians—first women, later men—crafted an art form and employed the technology of the phonograph to encourage freedom of movement and choice. At the moment the "race record" industry was being born, and black farmers and families were quietly picking up and leaving the South, the music they traveled with was the blues. The paper will look at examples of blues singers whose records dealt specifically with the Great Migration and consider their influence on listeners.

Cet article considère la manière dont le « race-record » blues des années 1920 et 1930 a renforcé la décision des agriculteurs, des métayers, et des ouvriers Afro-Américains d'émigrer vers les villes du nord. L'objectif général est de montrer comment les Afro-Américains se sont servi du blues comme accompagnement musical pour cette « grande migration ». En un sens, les vinyles de blues représentaient un récit de voyage musical pour des dizaines de milliers de personnes. Les chanteurs et les musiciens de blues ont conçu leur art et ont utilisé la technologie du phonographe en ayant pour but d'encourager la liberté de mouvement et de choix. Enfin, cet article examine en détail des exemples de disques de blues qui traitaient directement de la « grande migration », ainsi que leurs influences sur les musiciens et le public.

INDEX

Keywords: American South, Blues records, Great Migration, modernity, music
Mots-clés: disques vinyles de blues, grande migration, modernité, musique, Sud des États-Unis

AUTHOR

LOUIS MAZZARI

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi, Istanbul